(b) the number of passport offices in the country and their grade;

(c) whether Government propose to issue electronic passports;

'(d) whether such passports are already issued; and

(e) if not, by when such passports are proposed to be issued?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) The number of Indian passports issued during the last ten years is 2.9 crores. However, the number of valid passports in circulation in the country is around 2.5 crores.

(b) Currently, there are 31 Passport Officers. These are not graded.

(c) Yes, Sir. The Government have decided to introduce e-passport, also known as bio-metric passports, initially for dipolmats and officials as a pilot project.

(d) No, Sir.

(e) The pilot project for issuance of e-passports in the diplomatic and official categories will be undertaken by the end of 2007. Based on the experience gained from this pilot project, it is proposed to start issuance of e-passports in the ordinary category by the end of 2008.

Court of Enquiry for Bhatdih Colliery

*159. SHRI TAPAN KUMAR SEN:
SHRI PRASANTA CHATTERJEE:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether the statutory Court of Enquiry for Bhatdih Colliery (Nagda Section of BCCL) accident on 6th September, 2006 has been constituted;

(b) whether non-judicial personnel are included in the Court of Enquiry;

(c) whether normally sitting or retired Judges of High Courts/Supreme Court are appointed by Government for the chairmanship of such Statutory Committees;

(d) if so, the reasons for nominating non-judicial personnel in this Court of Enquiry;

(e) whether the trade unions have raised objection on appointment of non-judicial personnel; and

(f) if so, the steps taken by Government in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COAL (DR. DASARI NARAYAN RAO): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir.

(c) No, Sir.

(d) to (f) Trade Union Leaders had raised objection on this appointment in the 29th meeting of Standing Committee on Safety in Coal Mines held under the Chairmanship of former Minister of Coal on 17-11 -2006 at New Delhi. As stated in reply to part (c) above, it is not mandatory to have the Court of Enquiry chaired by a judicial person.

New airport in Assam

*160. SHRI URKHAO GWRA BRAHMA: Will the Minister of DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH EASTERN REGION be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that NEC is taking up the issue of setting up of a new airport within BTAD area of Assam as requested by the BTC;

(b) whether his Ministry has taken up the matter with Ministry of Civil Aviation and the Planning Commission; and

(c) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH EASTERN REGION (SHRI MANI SHANKAR AIYAR): (a) to (c) Yes, Sir. The North Eastern Council has in its Annual Plan, 2007-08 included a proposal for assistance to prepare Detailed Project Reports for greenfield airports at Kokrajhar in the BTAD area. A similar proposal for Tawang and for upgradation of airports at Pasighat, Tezu, Kamalpurarid Kailashahrhave also been proposed.